

Local veterans find needed help at fair



Marine Corps Anita Hicks of Jackson explores veterans' assistance provided by Community Action Agency of Jackson. At the table is Hicks' nephew Kaison curiously exploring things for himself.

By John Hummer
Exponent staff writer

In an effort to help ease the pain for veterans working through endless mazes of red tape, on Friday Congressman Tim Walberg hosted a Veterans Claims Fair. The event provided "one stop shopping" that allowed veterans to visit several agencies at one location.

Seventy-five veterans from throughout the area took advantage of the opportunity to find assistance that's out there but not necessarily known to them.

"It's amazing. I believe if you come out to these events and you help one veteran, then it is well worth it," said Gary Easterling, director for American Legion's Veterans Affairs and Rehabilitation Office in Detroit. "We helped eight veterans today with new claims. It's been a really good day."

Agencies represented at the fair aided veterans with filing for VA benefits, checked the status of existing claims, helped with eBenefits registration, answered compensation/pension questions, helped with vocational rehabilitation and employment applications, and answered health care benefits and enrollment questions.

"Our veterans sacrificed so

much for the freedoms we enjoy today and we have an obligation to provide the best quality health care when they return home," said Walberg. "My office and I are here to help veterans navigate the VA and get access to the benefits and resources they deserve through their brave service to our country."

Elise Layton, constituent relations specialist for Congressman Walberg, handles veterans' case work for the congressman.

"I see a lot of the issues that veterans have working through the bureaucracy," she said. "We wanted to have an event where people could come and actually talk to people from the benefits side of the VA as well as the health care side, get their questions answered and get what they need to get done the same day. The congressman recognizes there are things to fix, there are problems, and there are potential solutions. We want to make sure people are connected with their benefits."

Several agencies represented at the fair met up with new veterans they were able to assist.

"A lot of veterans don't realize we have a VA outpatient medical clinic right here in Jackson County on Page Avenue in Michigan Center," said April LaRock, outreach coordinator of the VA Ann Arbor Healthcare system. "They can access primary health care or mental health care there."

LaRock was passing out enrollment packets at the fair.

Her colleague, outreach social worker Katie Hardwick, works for the homeless program out of the Michigan Center clinic. She handles outreach to homeless veterans or veterans that are at risk of losing their homes.

"I was able to identify a couple of new veterans today who are in need of help with their housing," Hardwick said. Hardwick conducts her outreach by visiting the Jackson Interfaith Shelter regularly and receives a lot of referrals from various community partners as well as from partners within the veterans system.

Anita Hicks, a veteran who served at the Marine Corps headquarters in Washington, D.C. for four

years, visited the fair.

"I thought I'd check it out to see what services they have to offer," said Hicks. "I've found out about home buying and medical assistance," she said.

Tami Farnum oversees veterans programs for the Community Action Agency on Greenwood Avenue in Jackson, including a program that helps house homeless veterans or those facing becoming homeless. Her office works with the Veterans Service Offices and the VA medical centers in six counties throughout the region.

"We can help them either sustain their housing or find them housing," Farnum said. "We also work with them on becoming stable – putting them in touch with resources that are in the community."

CAA can also provide rental or utility assistance.

"The goal is to get them housed first or remain in their housing and then help them become sustainable," she said. "Part of our program is to help veterans get in touch with the benefits they are eligible for," she said. "Some of them don't realize they're eligible for some medical benefits through the VA."

One fair attendee was recently retired from a second career with the Federal Aviation Administration.

"I learned a lot of things in the Air Force, but they never taught me how to retire," said veteran Merle Perrine who recently returned to live in the Jackson area. "I was never introduced to VA or anything that was available on the outside. I'm just trying to figure out where I fit in the VA scheme of things. This is very valuable to find out what is available to me."



Tom Jones of Michigan Operation Freedom Outdoors and his service dog, Baxter, had a booth at the Veterans Claims Fair. The organization is a collaborative partnership whose mission is to "provide outstanding outdoor recreation opportunities to wounded veterans and individuals with health challenges." The organization coordinates a support network that facilitates their recovery through connecting with nature. Activities are centered around the DNR-managed Sharonville State Game Area near Norvell, but Jones is working on expanding the program to more locations statewide.

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